

Selecting the Right Car Seat

Stages of Car Seat Use

Child
Safety
Facts
2009

The **SAFEST** car seat for your child is the one that . . .

Fits your child

Car seats are designed for a child of average size. Your own child's size and needs may vary. Make sure your child is within the car seat weight and height guidelines. Check labels and instructions.

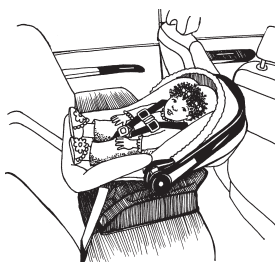
Fits your car

Not every car seat can be installed correctly in every car. Make sure the car seat fits correctly in your car before using it with your child. If you need help, go to a local car seat checkup event or inspection station (see Resources).

Is easy for YOU to use correctly every time

Find a child car seat that is easy for you to use properly every time. The easier it is for you to use, the more likely it is you will use it correctly every time you travel.

Stage 1: Rear-facing Car Seat



Birth up to at least 18 to 24 months

Infant-only seat: rear facing only up to 22 to 32 pounds; small, easy to use, and easy to carry.

Convertible car seat: use rear facing up to 30 to 35 pounds; large, stays in car; can be used forward facing when baby is older and bigger.

Car bed: for newborns with medical needs to lie flat.

Stage 2: Forward-Facing Car Seat with Harness



Over 18 months (at least over age 1 **AND** over 20 pounds), **up to 40 to 80 pounds**

Convertible, forward-facing-only seat, built-in child seat, or vest: most fit up to 40 pounds, some go up to 60 to 80 pounds.

Combination Seat: use with the harness up to 40 to 80 pounds; can be used without the harness as a booster seat when child is older and heavier.

Stage 3: Booster Seat with Lap-Shoulder Belt



Over at least 35 to 40 pounds; up to 8+ years

Use a booster only with lap-shoulder belt; some boosters fit child up to 100 pounds (check label); use until a lap-shoulder belt fits well (see below).

If no shoulder belt is available or if the child is too young to sit still in a booster, use a car seat or vest for children over 40 pounds (see Resources).

Stage 4: Lap-Shoulder Belt That Fits Well

Over 8–10 years; use the 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test by SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. (see Resources).

Crash Testing and Ratings

Every kind of car safety seat (car seat) sold in the United States is required by law to pass tough crash tests. These tests show what would happen if a car was driven into a brick wall at high speed. This is a much more serious kind of crash than most people will ever be in. All car seats that pass these tests are safe to use.

Most, if not all, car seat makers do more testing with even tougher crash tests to make sure their car seats are safe.

There are also several rating programs for car seats, such as *Consumer Reports*, *Baby Bargains*, IIHS fit rating, and the NHTSA Ease-of-Use-Ratings. Most programs are based on how easy the testers thought the car seats were to use. *Consumer Reports* and IIHS also do some crash testing.

Rating programs can be helpful. Be aware that a “best pick” may not be the best car seat to fit your child and your car. Sometimes a car seat rated poorly for fit may be a good fit for your child.

See page 2 for more information on choosing a car seat.

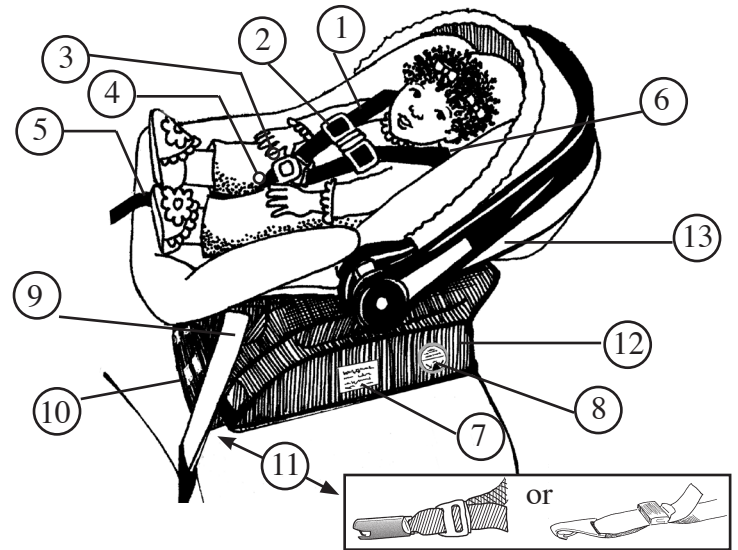


Car seat features to look for:

- **Size limits for longest use (on labels/instructions):**
 - An infant seat that can be used for babies under 5 pounds. Height limit should be at least 30 inches.
 - A convertible seat that can go rear facing to at least 30 pounds and forward facing over 40 pounds.
 - A forward-facing-only seat or harness that can be used over 40 pounds.
 - A booster that can be used over 80 pounds.
- **Harness:** A 5-point harness (with shoulder, hip, and crotch straps). In an infant seat, this helps keep baby in position better than a 3-point harness or a car seat with a shield (tray). With older children, a 5-point harness may fit better and allow longer use.
- **Harness buckle:** It should be easy to fasten and release. Buckles are required to be stiff enough so kids cannot unbuckle them. Some buttons also are hard for adults to push, especially people with arthritis.
- **Harness adjuster:** A front harness adjuster. This type is much easier to use and to use correctly.
- **Harness chest clip:** Easy to open and close.
- **Seat belt slots (belt path):** Openings for the seat belt that are big enough to fit your hands in easily. LATCH straps usually use the same path.
- **Seat belt lock-off:** Some car seats have a part that locks the lap or shoulder belt. Check the instructions about use. Make sure it is easy to use.
- **Lower LATCH connectors:** Connectors that push on and release with a push-button are usually easiest.
- **Level (recline) indicators (on rear-facing seats):** They should be easy for you to see and understand.
- **Level adjuster (on rear-facing seats):** It should be easy for you to adjust the tilt of the car seat to make sure baby is at a safe angle. You must make sure baby rides at the correct angle so baby's head doesn't flop forward. A very young baby can have trouble breathing if her head flops forward.

If possible, take the car seat to your car and install it before buying it. If buying a convertible seat, install it both rear facing and forward facing. **Always** follow the instructions of the car seat and the car owner's manual.

Make sure it can be installed tightly. To check this, hold the car seat at the belt path. Pull side to side and forward. It should not move more than 1 inch.



Parts of a car seat:

1. Harness (5 point)	6. Shoulder harness slots	10. Recline adjuster
2. Chest clip	7. Labels	11. LATCH straps (lower attachments and connectors)
3. Buckle	8. Level (recline) indicator	12. Base (infant seats)
4. Crotch strap	9. Seat belt path	13. Shell/carrier
5. Harness adjuster		

Check a second-hand car seat carefully

A used car seat may have hidden safety problems. Make sure all recalls (if any) have been repaired and that the seat has all its parts and instructions. If the car seat has been in a crash, it should not be used again. Check for an expiration date. If none, avoid using a car seat over 6 years old. **Newer car seats are easier to use and often have better safety features.**

Don't move to the next stage too early

Rear-facing seats (Stage 1) protect children the best. Seat belts (Stage 4) are made for adults and do not protect young children well. Keep babies rear facing as long as possible. Keep children in a seat with a harness as long as possible. Keep older children in a booster until the seat belt fits properly.

Resources

NHTSA Auto Safety Hotline, general car seat information, recalls, crash testing, Ease-of-Use Ratings: 888-327-4236, 800-424-9153(tty), www.safercar.gov

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. (SBS USA) Helpline, 5-Step Seat Belt Fit Test, recall list: 800-745-7233 or www.carseat.org

Car seat inspections—local sites: 866-732-8243 or www.seatcheck.org

Partners for Child Passenger Safety (The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia): www.chop.edu/carseat

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org/parents.html

List of products with harnesses for children over 40 pounds: Some products have a harness rated for use by children weighing 50 to 65 pounds. Some go to an even higher weight. See list at www.saferidenews.com.